

Writing a Research Paper: Guidance for the Perplexed

Selecting a Topic

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Guide to Research Techniques

Suggested Research Topics: Master's Degree in Education (U.S.)

Suggested Research Topics: PhD and Scholarly

Selecting a Research Topic:

The most important criterion for selecting a research topic is that you are really interested in it! Research is a lot of work, and not all of that work is enjoyable in the short term. If you are not seriously committed to your topic, odds are you won't get around to completing your research project, or you will make yourself very unhappy trying.

Pick a topic that you already know something about, have already worked on professionally, or have researched already in a previous course or program. Pick a topic that is related to your on-going work or career interests. Study something that will be of use to you in the future, as well as of possible importance to others. For a list of topics that are of current general interest in urban secondary education, see [Suggested Topics](#), but remember that there are many other issues and approaches that are also important and may be closer to your own interests and experience.

Don't waste your time on a trivial topic; life is too short and research is too difficult to do well. Find out what the current issues of interest and importance are among other researchers and professionals in your field by reading the recent issues of the major research journals in your broad areas of interest. If you don't already know the titles of those

journals, use [ERIC](#) or another indexing and abstracting database, or use a [general search engine](#) on the WWWeb to find out. Enter your topic's keywords and a word such as "journal" or "periodical" or "society" or "association" and follow the links to identify journals. You can also consult a Reference Librarian for help.

Getting Started with Research: Information Sources

Increasingly today information sources for research are in electronic form: index and abstract databases, on-line full-text journals, material published on the web. Of course there is a lot of printed material as well, especially older information and printed copies of newly published books and journals. For most researchers the Library and the Web are the best places to start looking. All research begins with finding out what is already known or believed about your topic; after that you are prepared to go out and create or discover new information, or find evidence that disagrees with accepted beliefs.

To find information you have to know two basic things: how information is organized and classified in the field you are interested in, and the keywords or descriptor terms that are used to locate information in databases. Even the catalogue of books in a library is a database that is accessed by use of keywords. Some keywords are simple: an author's last name, the keywords in a book title. Most keywords are a bit arbitrary: only one of many possible synonyms or similar words is the one that has been chosen as the index word for the database. The ERIC databases in Education research have an entire book listing their keywords, called *descriptors*: the *ERIC Thesaurus of Descriptors*. This information is also available through the [CD-ROM versions of ERIC](#). Making a list of possible descriptors relevant to your topic is an important first step. You will also need a slightly different list for library catalogues or for using other databases. Ask a reference librarian how to find the LC (= Library of Congress) Subject Headings and other keywords for these.

Get started searching. Keep track of all the most useful possible items you find; write them down, print them out, download them to a disk. Make notes of the most successful keyword combinations for searching, the most frequent journals that appear in your results, the most frequently mentioned authors. Search on the authors' names for more information, and consult the recent issues of the journals. Start with the most recent sources and use their citations and bibliographies to work your way back in history. In most research today outside history and the humanities, work that is more than 10 years old is usually not considered still current. There are, however, always a few "classics" in every area, and you should try to identify these and read them. They are easy to find: almost all later work will refer back to them, and they will have the earliest dates of any works that are frequently referenced (i.e. by several different writers). If you are writing a PhD, you will discover that most ideas go back to a "philosopher" or primary theoretician, and you should get to know these original writings as well.

Sorting the Wheat from the Chaff

Unfortunately, the percentage of well-researched, well-thought through, and useful writings in any field is only a very small fraction of all the seemingly relevant material you will find. You will also discover that the searching systems turn up many items that seem to be relevant but turn out not to be about the topics you expected. You will normally have chosen items because the **titles** seemed relevant. Titles are misleading, often more general than the actual content of the work. Look at the **abstract** for a better idea of the real content. When you look at the actual book or article, read the first paragraph, then read the last paragraph, then look at any diagrams or tables. You will often set it aside without reading any more and save time.

Once you have decided that a work is relevant to your topic and interests, you must try to judge **quality**. Only expert researchers can really do this, but you will start to become an expert at least on one small topic as you continue. It may be elitist to say so, but it is still most often true, that you can best judge quality, as a non-expert, not by content but by prestige: Who published the work? a major or a minor publisher? a well-known and respected journal or one with lower standards? Where does the researcher work? at a major research university, or somewhere you never heard of? How many other researchers cite or refer to work by this author? In the case of multiple authors, the reputation of the most

famous author is the guarantee of quality. Of course famous people also write second-rate work once in a while. And you may find something that deserves to become famous but isn't yet.

When you are dealing with sources on the internet and the **WWW** (web), you have to be especially careful. Anyone can publish anything on the web, and there is a lot of bizarre material, from hoaxes and jokes to paranoid fantasies and people just writing on subjects they know very little if anything about. Work that can't get published elsewhere can be found on the web. This is good for radical or unpopular new ideas, but it is bad for new researchers looking for reliable information and helpful ideas. In general, information on institutional pages of academic servers (host.edu) is reliable, as is material on pages by faculty members at *major* universities. University servers also host pages for students and sometimes employees, and in their sites one can find most anything. When following a link, think about who is recommending it. Most reliable are links recommended by libraries or professional organizations (host.org), and by university departments and faculty members. A good set of guidelines for evaluating information sources is found at <http://www.science.widener.edu/~withers/webeval.htm> .

Analyzing and Synthesizing

The last step in the library/WWW portion of your research is to *critically* read, analyze, and synthesize all the most relevant sources you have found. Play one author off against another. Identify controversial issues and the different viewpoints about them; find the consensus that exists among major researchers if there is one. Organize your review of this research literature around themes and topics that apply to several articles, chapters, or books, etc.; do not discuss each item separately without relating it carefully to others. Look at the chronological and historical development and changes in ideas. Identify the most important new information and concepts that played a role in changing how people look at the topic or what they believe ought to be done.